



Making Meaning: An Introduction to Interpretation

Instructors:

Emiliano “Nano” Calderon, County Historical Commission
Outreach Coordinator

Laura Casey, Museum Services Program Coordinator

Emily Hermans, Museum Services Program Specialist

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Today's Agenda

9:30 – 10:00 Introduction and Welcome

- i. Learning Objectives
- ii. Agenda
- iii. Personal Stories

10:00 – 11:00 Introducing Interpretation

- i. Definitions
- ii. Tilden's Original Six Principles
- iii. Tangibles/Intangible
- iv. Universals

11:00 – 11:15 Break

11:15 – 11:45 Maslow's Hierarchy

11:45 – 12:45 Essential Qualities of Interpretation I

- i. Enjoyable
- ii. Relevant

Working Lunch

12:45 – 1:45 Essential Qualities of Interpretation II

- i. Thematic
- ii. Purposeful

1:45 - 2:00 Break

2:00 – 3:00 Making Meaning

- i. The NPS Interpretive Equation
- ii. Staircase to Stewardship
- iii. Interpretation in the Field

3:00 – 3:30 Review and Wrap-up

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Learning Objectives

1. Attendees will use principles of interpretation in informal interpretation.
2. Attendees will recognize tangibles, intangibles, and universals concepts.
3. Attendees will identify and create opportunities for interpretation.

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Personal Stories

- What was the best historic site, museum, or program you attended?
- What made the experience memorable?
- What would you improve about that experience?



Cotton Gin Museum, Burton, TX

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What we'll cover in this section:

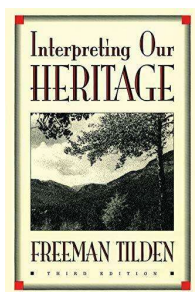
- Definitions of Interpretation
- Tilden's Original Six Principles
- Tangibles and Intangibles
- Universals
- Maslow's Hierarchy



Bullock Museum, Austin, TX

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- “An educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.” **(Freeman Tilden, 1957)**
- “A mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource.” **(National Association for Interpretation)**



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Tilden's Original Six Principles

1. Any Interpretation that does not somehow **relate** to what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is **revelation** based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials are presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree **teachable**.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but **provocation**.
5. Interpretation should aim to **present the whole** rather than the part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.*
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally **different approach(es)**.

Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

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Tips from Tilden

- **Provoke** attention, curiosity and interest.
- **Relate** to the everyday life of your visitors.
- **Reveal** the theme through some creative or unusual viewpoint.
- **Address the Whole:** make sure your program relates to your theme.
- **Message unity:** use supporting elements to illustrate your theme.



Courtesy of the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery

<https://www.heritagedestination.com/hdc-library---tildens-tips/>

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Tangibles

- The physical elements of a site or object.
- They are things you experience with your senses.
- Examples: A boat, a tree, a battlefield, a mountain, a zoo specimen, or an ecosystem.



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Intangibles

- Intangible meanings are abstract concepts.
- They include ideas, feelings, relationships, values or beliefs.
- Examples: Democracy, freedom, death, health, and loss.

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Universals

- Ideas or emotions that can be related to, contain meaning, or appeal to almost everyone.
- Examples: Family, death, prejudice, love, hunger, survival.

Universal Themes

1. Change
2. Conflict
3. Order vs Chaos
4. Patterns
5. Power
6. Structure
7. Systems
8. Relationships

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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

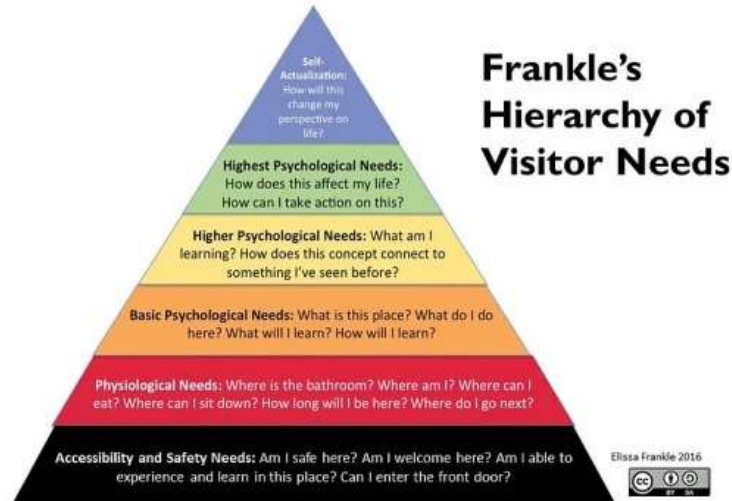
- Basic Needs: Physiological, Safety and Security
- Growth Needs: Love and Belonging, Esteem, Self Actualization
- Interpretation can help people spend less time concerned over their basic needs so that there is a better chance to achieve higher-level thinking.



<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

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Audience Needs and Wants



<https://www.frankleolinsky.com/maslow-in-museums>

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Qualities of Interpretation

What we'll cover in this section:

- Qualities of Interpretive Programming
- Themes
- Goals, Objectives, and Mission Statements
- Falk's Visitor Categories
- Best Practices



Bullock Museum, Austin, TX

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Qualities of Interpretation



"Then Now Wow," Minnesota History Center

What distinguishes interpretation from other forms of communication?

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Interpretation is Enjoyable

What audiences love to hear, see, and experience:

- [Quality stories](#)
- [Unusual facts](#)
- [Inspiring quotes or thoughts](#)
- [Information in terms they understand](#)
- Things that evoke emotional or physiological responses



Texas City Museum (Courtesy of Texas City Museum)

Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets* (North American Press, 1993).
National Association for Interpretation, *Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook*, 2003.

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What audiences don't care about:

- Ordinary data
- Gloomy predictions or rehashing of catastrophes
- The same information they've heard at every other site



Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets* (North American Press, 1993).
National Association for Interpretation, *Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook*, 2003.

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Ways to make interpretation enjoyable:

- Use [active verbs](#)
- Involve the [senses](#)
- Show [cause and effect](#)
- Link [science to history](#)
- Use [visual metaphors](#)
- Use [personification](#)

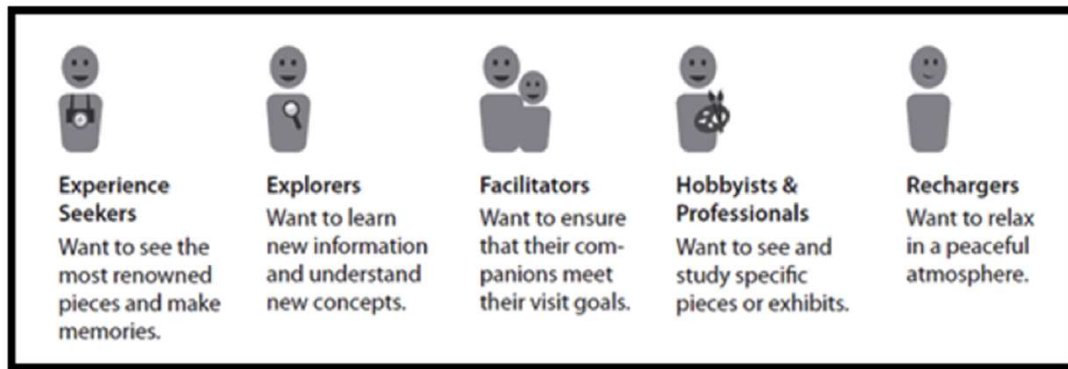


Frisco Heritage Museum; Courtesy of Erin McClelland Museum Services

Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets* (North American Press, 1993).
National Association for Interpretation, *Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook*, 2003.

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Interpretation is **Relevant**



<https://forartsake-uk.medium.com/>

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Interpretation is **Relevant**

How to make interpretation relevant:

- Personalize
- Use 'grouping' or 'labeling'
- Relate to universal concepts
- Connect to the audience's frame of reference
- Bridge gaps with metaphors, similes, analogies, and comparisons



First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum; Courtesy of Imperial War Museum

Sam Ham, *Environmental Interpretation: A Practical Guide for People with Big Ideas and Small Budgets* (North American Press, 1993).
National Association for Interpretation, *Certified Interpretive Host Trainer Workbook*, 2003.

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Interpretation is **Relevant**



Arkansas State University Museum (Courtesy of MuseWork)

- What reasons do visitors have for coming to your site?
- What are commonly or most frequently asked questions by you visitors?
- What can that tell us about their motivations?

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Interpretation is **Thematic**

Topic

A broad general category

- Archeology
- Cemeteries
- Historic houses

Theme

Answers the question 'so what?'

- Archeologist use different tools to learn about the past.
- We can help preserve cemeteries.
- Architecture styles influence lifestyles.

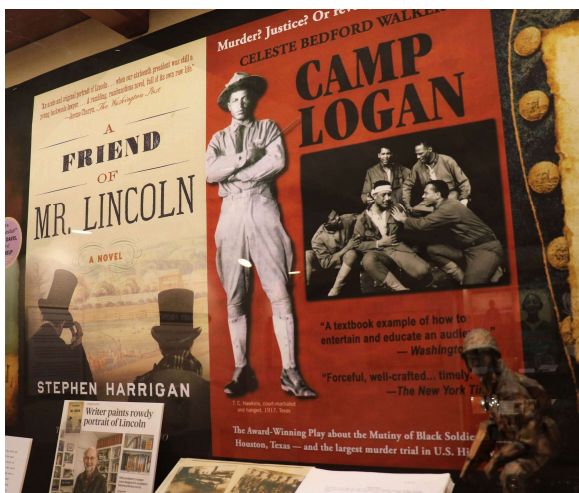
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Interpretation is Thematic

- Bluebonnets represent the character of Texas.
- Endangered Texas animals
- Modern agriculture has roots in the not-so-distant past.
- Plants, trains, and automobiles
- This old house
- Historic houses reflect the life and times of their owners.
- The old west wasn't so wild after all.
- Famous cowboys and their horses

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Interpretation is Thematic



Wittliff Collections, San Marcos, TX

- Is there a sentence that summarizes the theme of your site/museum?
- What is it people will understand after they've completed their visit?
- What are some things that communicate the theme to visitors?

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Post Oak County Museum Mission Statement

The Post Oak County Museum preserves and interprets the history, culture, and stories of Post Oak County. This is for the enrichment of all residents, descendants and any with an interest in this esoteric Texas county.



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Required Elements:

- Educational in scope
- Describes the institution's unique purpose/focus/role
- Approved by the governing authority

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What we'll cover in this section:

- The Interpretive Equation
- Staircase to Stewardship
- Interpretation in the Field



Public Notice 3, Jitish Kallat, Grand Staircase at the Art Institute of Chicago, 2010

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$$KR + KA \times AT = IO$$

Knowledge of the resource (KR), combined with knowledge of the audience (KA), can be shared through an appropriate technique (AT) to provide an interpretive opportunity (IO).

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$$\underline{\text{KR}} + \text{KA} \times \text{AT} = \text{IO}$$

Knowledge of the Resource (KR)

- Information about the resource
 - Honest, accurate, current
 - Past and present uses and issues
 - Current conditions, potential threats
 - Compelling stories
- More than “the facts”
 - Meanings associated with the resource
 - Intangibles, and universal concepts
- There are many “truths”
 - Multiple perspectives, values



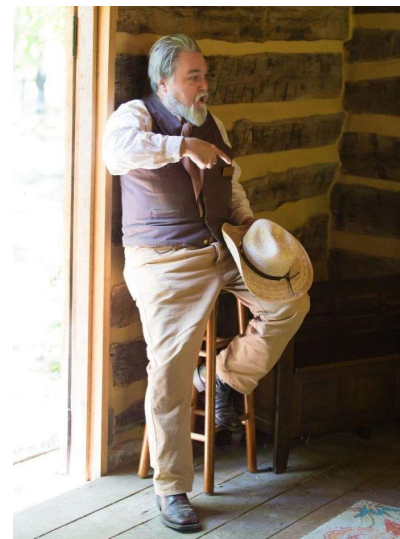
Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site (Courtesy of MuseWork)

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$$\text{KR} + \underline{\text{KA}} \times \text{AT} = \text{IO}$$

Knowledge of the Audience (KA)

- Recognition and familiarity with visitor backgrounds
- Acknowledgment and sensitivity to visitor needs
- Meanings that visitors may associate with the resource



Log Cabin Village, Fort Worth, TX

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NPS Interpretive Equation

$$KR + KA \times \underline{AT} = IO$$

Appropriate Technique (AT)

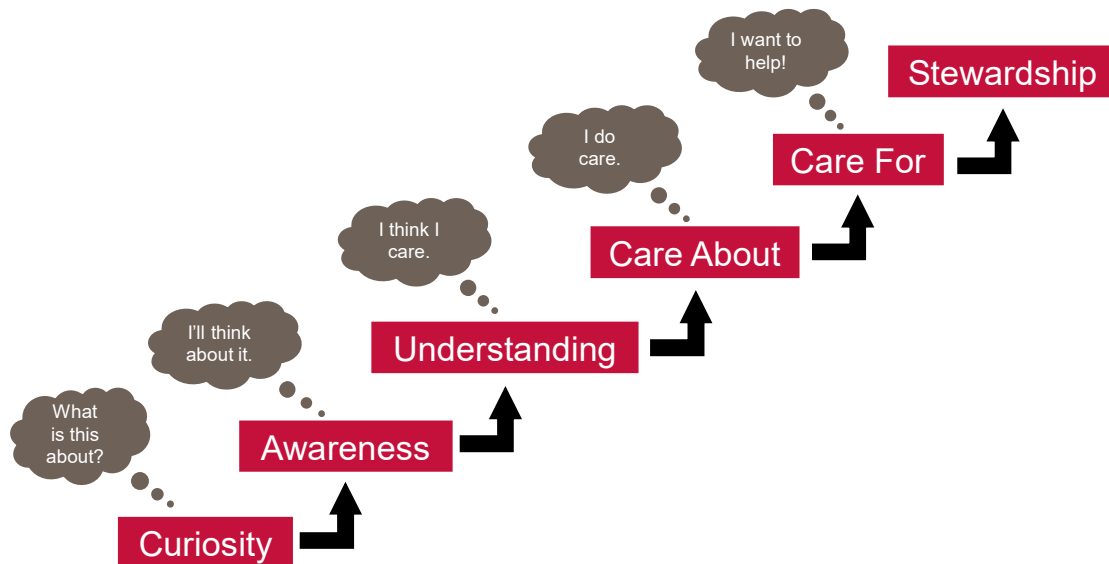
- Involve/engage the audience (passively and/or actively)
- Provide access to resource meanings
- Facilitate opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings



Courtesy of Erin McClelland Museum Services

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Staircase to Stewardship



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Interpretation in the Field

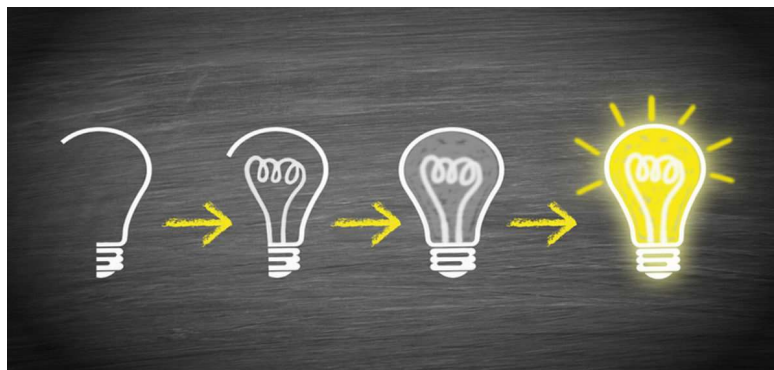


- What topics are typically discussed by visitors?
- Can we create opportunities for interpretation from these?
- What are some strategies we can use to turn these questions into interpretive opportunities or programs?

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Wrap Up Activity

Write one thing you've learned during this workshop.



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For additional resources and this slideshow presentation,
visit the THC's Museum Services webpage at:

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/museumworkshops>